

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 975

IR 018 388

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TITLE Quest of Visual Literacy: Deconstructing Visual Images of Indigenous People.
PUB DATE Jan 97
NOTE 10p.; In: VisionQuest: Journeys toward Visual Literacy. Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (28th, Cheyenne, Wyoming, October, 1996); see IR 018 353.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Critical Thinking; *Critical Viewing; *Cultural Images; Ethnic Groups; Film Criticism; *Films; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Indigenous Populations; Inquiry; Misconceptions; *Visual Literacy; Visual Stimuli
IDENTIFIERS *Africa (Sub Sahara); *Gods Must Be Crazy (The); Visual Representation

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces five concepts that guide teachers' and students' critical inquiry in the understanding of media and visual representation. In a step-by-step process, the paper illustrates how these five concepts can become a tool with which to critique and examine film images of indigenous people. The Sani are indigenous people of the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa. The culture, language and social life of the Sani has been represented in the film, "The Gods Must Be Crazy" (1984). Through the humorous images in the film, the writer-director makes jokes about the absurdities and discontinuities of African life. In films, through the manipulation of camera angles and other techniques, the viewer is given a sense of realism. Such ploys of visual representations of people demand a careful analysis to discover: (1) what is at issue; (2) how the issue/event is defined; (3) who is involved; (4) what the arguments are; and (5) what is taken for granted, including cultural assumptions. Each of these questions is explored in relation to "The Gods Must Be Crazy." In critical viewing in general, a systematic mode of inquiry should be applied which focuses on the visual, source, origins, and the determinants of media and visual constructions. By using these five concepts in critical inquiry, the ways in which the language of visuals is socially and historically produced can be examined. (Contains 13 references.) (AEF)

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Quest of Visual Literacy: Deconstructing Visual Images of Indigenous People

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to introduce five concepts that guide teachers' and students' inquiry in the understanding of media and visual representation. In a step by step process, I will show how these five concepts can become a tool with which to critique and examine film images of indigenous people so as to expose the oppressive spaces in the daily dose of media and visual messages designed to provide information and entertainment to credulous audiences. This essay aims to be a model for teachers contemplating to use such tools in their own classrooms to teach critical viewing, critical thinking, and critical reading skills.

Introduction

Critical inquiry is a term currently used among educators that sparks controversy. For some educators, critical inquiry reflects a new approach that allows teachers to construct pedagogical practices which connect with their students' experiences and provide students with a vision of social change by encouraging them to research their own topics and ask their own questions. This approach stands in contrast with teaching the classics and a canon of acceptable literary works far removed from the students' experiences to be memorized for exams. For many other educators, critical inquiry is another fad, a resurrection of old ideas growing out of a long history in education of creating new labels for old ideas without any real change in classrooms and schools.

Critical inquiry is not a fad. It draws from social theory studies of popular culture, the media in its many forms, literature, the role of the state in struggles over race, class and gender relations, national and international economic structures, and the cultural politics of imperialism and postcolonialism (Giroux, 1987; Giroux & Simon, 1989; McLaren, Hammer, Sholle, & Reilly, 1995). Simply put, critical inquiry means questioning. This practice of questioning requires both teachers and students to account for their own beliefs and practices by exploring the contradictions that are necessarily inherent in their own lives.

In the study of visual communication and visual literacy, critical inquiry is not used widely in classrooms as a tool for deconstructing visual images, particularly those images that represent people's culture, identity, or ethnicity. While this has begun to occur in some schools, it is not yet common practice in all schools. With critical inquiry, students learn to become critical consumers who are aware of visual manipulation and stereotyping as an important project of critical literacy education.

In order to illustrate the current inquiry movement, I decided to apply the work which I and other university researchers in critical pedagogy have engaged in over the past 10 years. This method of inquiry is based on the rationale that if we hope to create media and visual environments that will help us change oppressive literacy practices, we have to think critically about what kinds of learning we want to go into the classrooms and the pedagogical spaces in which learning occurs for most students; how these literacy practices are projected or articulated with other social, political, and ideological forces.

Deconstructing Images of Indigenous People

In this essay, I introduce a discussion about the Sani. The Sani are the indigenous people of the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa. These people have for many years been called the "bushmen", a derogatory name coined by

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early European settlers in the early 1900s. This name has been used until recently, when Namibia got its independence in 1990. The culture, language, and social life of the Sani has been represented in the film: The Gods Must Be Crazy (1984). As the name "bushman" suggests, the Sani have been portrayed in this film as a creature of the Stone Age that persists to be an obstacle to progress, civilization, and modernization.

In the powerful visual and humorous images of The Gods, a South African writer-director, Jamie Uys, makes jokes about the absurdities and discontinuities of African life. He portrays the Sani culture as primitive, the environment in which they live is labelled as paradise on Earth, and their entire existence seems to clash sharply with "civilized" societies predominant in large cities and in Western Europe. In this pixilated absurdity, Uys wrote, produced, and directed The Gods, in which three divergent plot-threads are arbitrarily braided into a whole.

By bringing the discussion of the film about the Sani to the foreground, I expose the mistaken popular beliefs commonly portrayed about Africans in movies and television, especially in Travel, National Geographic, or Discovery films. This humorous anthropological story does not only show how different cultures perceive the same things in totally different ways, but it does so in a shameless manner.

A critical examination of The Gods Must Be Crazy coincides with the critical approach to inquiry made explicit in this essay. This approach provides a systematic educational model with which to read critically visual images of women, minorities, people from other cultures, ethnic groups, and images of other social groups embedded in media and visual messages, in order to recognize stereotypes, ethnocultural bias and discrimination, and to understand how these images help to structure our experience. The value of such critical pedagogy rests with the belief that visuals impart knowledge and can entertain while leaving permanent images on impressionable minds (Giroux & Simon, 1989). In his book, Return of the Repressed

Media Studies, Stuart Hall reminds us that media (and indeed visuals) play a significant role in the creation and reinforcement of specific images of the world, the manufacture of consent, and the positioning of political economic interests (Hall, 1982).

In the study of visual representation in films, the complex issues surrounding culture, identity, and ethnicity are brought to bear. The dominant visual techniques and coding devices employed by the producer of The Gods, to convince viewers of the accuracy or believability claimed in the story, combines the Hollywood classic cinema with ignorance associated with remote area groups (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985).

Watching the film prompted me to think about its underlying messages in relation to other films I had seen, and caused me to wonder if the politics and representations in The Gods had also been in other films about Africans. The continued reassertion of white racial hegemony and patriarchy seems to be most explicit in this film. Equally, the nature of the reality constructed by the film and the values implicit in its visual representations are wittingly intertwined with humor and cannot be taken for granted.

Readers may be troubled in two contrasting ways: on the one hand, some who are shocked by the obvious racism of the film may wonder why I worry about basic principles of visual representation; on the other hand, many may wish that the questions I pose could just be ignored, simply because, in their opinion, the film was only a piece of art and entertainment -- why not just follow one's pleasures and savor the riches that the world of narrative provides? Unfortunately, there are many sides to any piece of art!

Because all media and visual productions are produced from a variety of motivations, such underlying motives need to be questioned. Perhaps if we can find a responsible way of defending the ethical criticism of narrative, we will encourage similar probing in the other arts that I must neglect here. We are reminded of Andrew Bergman's study of the Depression in America and the movies, where he argued

that every movie is a cultural artifact and as such reflects the values, fears, myths, and assumptions of the culture that produces it (1971). In the pages that follow, I show that The Gods is indeed a product of such myths and fears.

In his essays on representation, Richard Dyer (1985) quipped: "how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them. Such seeing comes from representation" (p. 39). In order to question visual representations, as suggested by Dyer, it is important to adopt a systematic mode of inquiry. By using the following five concepts for inquiry about visual representation, issues of diversity, and the inequalities in knowledge and power that exist between those who manufacture information in their own interests and those who consume it innocently as news and entertainment are systematically and critically questioned.

Five Concepts for Critical Inquiry about Visual Representation

Visual representation refers to the way images and language actively construct meanings according to sets of conventions shared by and familiar to makers (producers) and audiences (viewers). As a visual representation of storytelling, films share much in common with the historical or fictional narrative, including plot, theme, character, setting, conflict, and resolution. Through the maneuvering of camera angles, cutting, and lighting, the manipulation of time and space is effectively accomplished to give the viewer a sense of realism. For this reason, such ploy of visual representations of people demand a careful analysis to discover (1) what is at issue, (2) how the issue / event is defined, (3) who is involved, (4) what the arguments are, and (5) what is taken for granted including cultural assumptions (See Figure 1). In short, a systematic mode of inquiry will focus on the visual, source, origins, and the determinants of media and visual constructions, all of which are carefully put together to influence the viewer in a certain way. Adapted from Werner and

Nixon's guide for teaching critical mindedness, these five concepts provide an important starting point for critical inquiry (Werner & Nixon, 1990). How might one apply such a critical inquiry to visual representations of the Gods Must Be Crazy?

What is the issue?

We must ask: What context motivated the production of The Gods? By questioning the production and construction of the meaning-making processes in visual representations, we will examine closely the visual imagery and popular representation of people which help shape their personal, social, and political worlds. In thinking about "what is the issue," I aim to direct attention towards the broader issues: (1) what sense do representations make of the world? (2) what are the visuals representing to us and how? In other words, how do the individuals represented in the film become seen or how does the way we see them influence how we treat them? (3) what are typical representations of groups in society? (4) what does this example of visuals represent to me? (5) what do the visuals mean to others who see it?

To decipher The Gods Must Be Crazy as a visual representation of culture, identity, and ethnicity, it is necessary to know something about South Africa's past history, its present domestic and foreign policies, and the singlemindedness with which South Africa before independence, used the system of apartheid to shape its future. Within its borders, South Africa had for almost four decades been creating a new territorial and demographic entity. Although we tend to hear only the pretty aspects of apartheid, its greatest manifestation was the manipulation of people within a finite space. As it has been acknowledged by several reviewers of this film, The Gods is an expression of this aspect of apartheid (Brown, 1982, p. 42); Denby, 1984, p. 47); Davis, 1985, p. 51; Keneas, 1984, p. 22). Accordingly, the film delves on this aspect of racist apartheid by inversion.

Figure 1
Critical Inquiry Questions

#	Inquiry	Key Questions
1.	The Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the issue? • What sense do media make of the world? • What do visuals mean to those who see them?
2.	Definitions of the Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the source of information? • What form does the issue take? • What information is left out?
3.	Who is involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What groups are involved? • Who is the media intended for? • Whose point of view does the media take?
4.	The Argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why was a certain media were selected? • What information in the visual is factual? • How is the message affected by what is left out?
5.	The Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What attitudes are assumed? • Whose voice is heard? • What points of view are assumed?

While the landscape of *The Gods* looks to be very much like South Africa, it is set in what some critics call the mythical country of Botswana. Because Uys' Botswana does not exist, except in his imagination; features of the landscape, dress, and custom are not to be found in real Botswana. Uys' Botswana is instead a dream of a happy-go-lucky bantustan, those equally fictitious homelands that the South African government tried to create all over South Africa, literally out of dust, for the dumping of African people. Clearly, the central issue posited in the film is about value questions defined by the film-maker's goals, ideals, and hopes. As always, the contention or challenge therefore is to recognize that many of the things of value to me are not necessarily valued to the same degree by other people.

How the Issue / Event is Defined?

As we consider how the event is defined, several questions come to mind: (1) what is the source of the information? (2) what form does it take? (3) how does the form shape

my understanding? (4) how does it serve or not serve my purposes? (5) what information is left out?

The first ten minutes of the film addresses the relationship between illusion and reality. "It looks like a paradise, but it is in fact the most treacherous desert in the world, the Kalahari." We see footage of the placid Kalahari "bushmen" searching for water. In this desert we meet the "dainty, small, and graceful Sani ("bushmen")." We're unsure of the film-maker's intent, suspecting satire, but the sequence turns out to be a fairly predictable documentary with dry, straight-faced narration about a peaceful, "primitive" tribe of tiny "bushmen" who live in a gracious, simple world digging for roots and foraging for berries, without any knowledge of crime or violence. A Coke bottle drops from a great silver bird in the heavens and into the orderly lives of the nomadic "Bushman" Xi and his family. The bottle, as it soon turns out, is a gift from the gods. You can blow on it and make a windy music, you can roll it and crush millet. Pretty soon

comes arguing over the bottle's possession followed by acrimony, anger, and fights. The story about the Sani is being narrated and defined by an outsider who does not include the point of view of those whose story is being told. In this narration, the culture of the Sani and that of other African societies is presumed to be a quaint relic of the past rather than vibrant contemporary culture.

One might ask: Who are these "gods" who are crazy? They are the technologically advanced whites whose very garbage is a source of wonder to most of the developing world! In their simple wisdom, the Sani come to reject what white society has to offer, symbolized in the discarded bottle. This very rejection is a sop of white angst, because it means that the Sani do not covet the white standard of living, and so cannot be considered rivals—for South Africans, the ideal state of affairs. However admirable, the kind of decision this rejection represents is completely absent from the everyday lives of the indigenous peoples of South Africa. If there is one overwhelming fact of the dispossessed Tswanas, Zulus, Xhosas, and Sani, as it is for many Africans, it is that they have no control whatsoever over what they can accept or reject. For most Africans, the decision continues to be made by outsiders and that decision has never concerned itself in the least with what the African wants.

It would be curious to know how much Xi was paid for acting in the movie. Did he ever see the movie? What did he think of it? Has he read some of the raving reviews about his movie? Will he read this article? These rhetorical questions are simply an illustration of the predicament in which the continent of Africa lies in relation to the rest of the world. Like many Africans, the media are still out of reach and will be so for many years to come. Poverty is rampage; amenities of the modern world like telephones, electricity, plumbing, or simple, permanent housing is a dream for many indigenous peoples who live in remote areas and out of the urban circle. Why is it this way? The context within which Gods was made is not given anywhere in the production of this film.

Who is Involved?

As we explore "what groups are involved", our attention is drawn to two important questions: (1) who is the target audience? (2) what point of view is present? The idea of interest helps us to be critical of how a particular representation, issue, or event may be biased. Less obvious than identifying the filmmaker may be the fact that his reasons or arguments could be self-serving, designed largely to protect or enhance the invested interest or dominant perspective in some way. A vested interest includes any privilege that a group enjoys and considers their "right." Arguments may be designed to protect or enhance this interest — whether position, benefit, status, or credibility — perhaps at the expense of an opponent who is made to look foolish, selfish, stupid, immoral, uninformed, or downright perverse.

In the film The Gods Must Be Crazy, the filmmaker uses a narrator to guide the viewers and intones who and what is important. Some people are cast as victims; others as heroes. An ethnocultural bias runs throughout the plot. This bias portrays Africans as childlike, incompetent, and unscientific. This bias reinforces a long-standing myth about Africa — the Dark Continent. Even though the theme of this film may pretend to portray a simplistic tale of the search for the tranquil life and to satirize white urban living, beneath that tranquil life lies a parable about white South Africa with its basic values; those values of the privileged, for it is only those content with the world's goods who can afford to poke fun at them!

Who is in the film? The film's story is made of a number of intertwining plots. The first story involves Xi, the so-called "Bushman." As Uys shows it, the life of the "bushmen" is idyllic, completely in harmony with their environment, living communally, until a careless aviator throws a Coke bottle into their midst. In another subplot, set in a neighboring African-governed country, a revolutionary Sam Boga attempts a coup. He is unsuccessful, and together with his followers flees into Botswana. A third

subplot involves a white teacher who suddenly gets bored with her meaningless job in a city office and takes a job as a teacher in an African school in Botswana. There she meets up with Andrew Steyn, a shy, awkward biologist who eventually wins her. These three plots fuse at the resolution, when the African revolutionaries seize the white schoolteacher and her African pupils as hostages, and they are rescued by the biologist and Xi working as a team.

For many people, Africa is not a place but a state of mind, the heart of darkness. Africa has never been dark, however, to those who live there. It is ignorance on the part of the outsiders that was, and continues to be, dark.

The great tradition that Gods draws on is the journey through Africa. Not the sort of expedition where you hunt for animals, but the missionary journey where you hunt for the souls of human beings. When applied to white South Africa before independence, the notion of "missionary", someone with a mission, derives new meaning! This "mission" is essential to the white man's view of Africa. To Africa, Europe sent its missionaries, including its fanatics. The Afrikaner, the white man in that part of Africa we now call South Africa, decided early on that his mission was to bring the message of the bible to the wilderness. Unlike Dr. Livingstone's ambition to bring the Word of God to the people of Central Africa, the Afrikaner had no desire to share that Word with the kaffir, the unbelievers, for Afrikaners were God's Chosen People, and the Chosen do not share with the unchosen, for then how would you tell the difference (Davis, 1985, p. 51)? In the middle of this century, the Afrikaners' mission came to mean the protection of White Christian Civilization (i.e., the privileged against the Africans and Communism). In Uys' film, these two -- the Africans and Communism -- are personified by Sam Boga and his guerrillas.

A figurative interpretation of the plot, then, reveals that Africans are like children who are easily led astray by outside agitators (i.e., the African liberationists). When this

happens, the threat is not only to Africans but also to the white race personified by the heroine. To save Africans and Europeans alike, white organizational skills must mobilize all indigenous peoples and even African nature itself (in the shape of a poisonous bush). As the film illustrates, Andrew Steyn, the pacific, unworldly scientist--the personification of a technologically advance but nonaggressive South African--beats all the odds.

What are the Arguments?

This question drives the core issues of inquiry. Besides looking at what groups are involved in the film, an examination of the arguments postulated in the film reveals that The Gods has a strong point of view! What arguments enhance the interests of its dominant side and what arguments detract from the credibility of the other side? More specifically, students and teachers must ask the following critical questions:

(1) why was a particular visual image selected? (2) what information presented in the visual image is factual? (3) what portion of content is inaccurate? (4) why are shots/camera work arranged that way? (5) do visual images match narration? (6) how does sound affect visual images? (7) how is repetition of visual images, and text used? (8) how do graphics affect the message? (9) how does stillness or motion aid the message? (10) what is left out? (11) how is the message affected by what is left out?

It is important to look at how the visuals are manipulated in this film. For example, after about six minutes the film cuts to a big city, where we are introduced to "civilized man." Civilized humans, we are told, managed to make their lives more complicated by trying to make them easier. By contrast, the "bushmen" have a very simple life--until the Western world intrudes upon it.

The mission of Andrew Steyn, the biologist, is scientific discovery, in the innocuous form of examination of elephant droppings. Xi's mission, however, is the

preservation of the way of life of the "bushman."

The arguments are made through anecdotal stories of the way the people in the film go about doing their everyday work. Here, the underlying platitude by which most South Africans rationalize their relationship with Africans comes to the surface: "Africans are like children." In the film, they are children. By introducing the guerilla fighters, the film shows that their own government, being African, cannot be relied upon to protect them. They must be rescued by the ingenuity of a white man in collaboration with Xi the "Bushman."

All these people scurrying around the landscape of southern Africa, colliding in pratfalls, constitute a distorted microcosm of the class of peoples and ideologies that is in reality deeply tragic. What Uys has done in the film, in fact (albeit a fact disguised by humor), is to create in Gods the imaginary land that the architects of apartheid would have us believe in, where South Africa's intentions are the good for everyone. In this land of make-believe, entire villages drop their work and turn out to sing a hymn of welcome to a white teacher. This gesture depicts the relationship of Africans towards white people is gratitude for the help being given, of whites towards Africans, protective paternalism. This peaceful, dependent relationship would continue were it not for the advance of the guerrillas.

What is taken for granted?

To examine what is taken for granted in any text requires that viewers and readers question some of the cultural assumptions. The ways in which visual media constructions are read or evaluated by audiences in America are often not questioned enough. For example, different disciplines of science measure Africa in different ways: Geographers point to a climate that ranges from the burning Sahara, to the steamy rain forests of Zaire, to the dry savannas of Kenya. Biologists note the astonishing abundance and variety of the continent's wildlife, with a particular mention of

Tanzania's Serengeti and the Ngorongoro Crater. Epidemiologists speak with horror of deadly viruses like HIV and Ebola that are presumed to have come out of the jungle, and countless undiscovered microbes waiting to emerge.

For Anthropologists, Africa's most impressive statistics are the ones that measure the enormous diversity of its indigenous people. The diversity of the different African societies, from Ashanti to Zulu, and their customs provide a rich heritage more than a deficit culture. With varying histories, cultures and living, these indigenous peoples have lived on the continent for centuries and are spread over 50 independent countries. A majority of the indigenous people includes pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, hunters, and gatherers. Some 1,300 languages are spoken on the continent, about a third of the world's total. Each language represents a distinct indigenous group with its own beliefs and its own rituals and ceremonies – some of which have been performed for hundreds of years.

For the media, however, Africa is often misunderstood because of western media's dismissal of the continent as backward and therefore unworthy of coverage, until disaster strikes like in the case of the recent famine in Ethiopia, Somalia and Rwanda. What is not portrayed is that Africa is a diverse continent, both of re-emerging democracies and of troubled areas with leftover vestiges of colonialism, and is made up of many countries, climates, geographies, histories, and peoples.

By now, it is common knowledge that Africa overflows with indigenous forms of communication: theater, drumming, dancing, traditional storytelling, and village meetings which have informed and entertained for centuries. And yet, in the past 30 years, however, the continent has been inundated with radios, televisions, VCRs, and other western products. This state of affairs makes Africans "knowledge colonies." Most African states, apart from South Africa, are too poor to compete with European and American economies in terms of media production and dissemination. The reliance

on the West for all but local news results in reduced and distorted coverage of Africa consistent with the legacy of colonialism as portrayed in The Gods.

Tanzanians, for instance, get news about their neighbors, the Kenyans, from the western media. Nigerians learn about Tanzanian events from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). All over Africa the pattern is the same. The image we see in the United States, the corrupt, incompetent, starving, dependent, hopeless Africa, is the image manufactured in the West and transmitted to Africa, although there are pockets of resistance to this inundation by western media. Raised on a diet of Westernized history, Tarzan books and films, and sensationalized news media, many students in the United States believe Africa to be a primitive land of hot, steamy jungles inhabited by wild animals and savages. This myth is normalized and reinforced by The Gods Must Be Crazy.

Even though present day technological changes have brought far reaching structural changes in industrialized countries, particularly in the area of production and distribution of information and literacy materials, the situation in Africa and much of the developing world remains a challenge. Communities in metropolitan cities like Dar es Salaam, Johannesburg, Lagos, and Nairobi look to the communities of Los Angeles and New York with awe and wonder, imitating their music and fashion, and craving for the instant gratification and escape that movie entertainment has to offer.

However, unequal representation of news and events of non-western societies persists. African media outlets on the continent lack the technology and speed to generate reports or images of its people fast enough for the world beyond their borders. And yet, western media portray Africa as just one massive civil war, a famine-torn place with a few pyramids in the north, racial struggle in the south, civil wars, and some lions and elephants in between.

The reality about Africa has been distorted among non-Africans. For centuries, starting

with perceptions of the remote "Dark Continent", the worldview of many non-Africans, particularly Europeans, was clouded over with myths and stereotypes, and Africa was misconceived then as now with all the myths and stereotypes intact. Some of the simplest myths are most common: lions in the jungles, the isolated Dark Continent, inferior savages, a race of Negroes--heathens developed only by the grace of God and the White man--, and a land of turmoil, incapable of self-government. Because these myths and stereotypes are alive today in the schools' curriculum (however unintentional the distortions and omissions may be), in the hands of unaware and unskilled teachers, the curriculum continues to feed the racist doctrines and practices of white superiority and privilege.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to illustrate that the production of meaning from media and visual texts about what is important to know depends upon knowledge which is shared by a community. Such knowledge is constructed by individuals' belief system, their worldview, their use of language, and by the way they construct representations of self, others, and of the physical and societal environment.

One major aspect of teaching visual literacy is to identify where that knowledge represented in the visual comes from, and how it is constructed. How did we come to know what we know about a certain event, or group of people? Where did the perceptions we hold about Africans or certain ethnic groups come from? By posing these questions, the various assumptions underlying the production values of dominant news and entertainment media are investigated and critically evaluated.

The five concepts for critical inquiry about visual representation outlined in this essay cannot claim to substitute or uproot the century-old myths and stereotypes about Africa and the African people. These concepts, however, provide a framework to question such myths and stereotypes, which

have to a large extent been created in literature, media, and cinema. By using these concepts in critical inquiry, we also examine the ways in which the language of visuals is socially and historically produced.

Therefore, students need to be encouraged to question the clarity and strength for reasoning, identify assumptions and values, recognize points of view and attitudes, and evaluate conclusions and actions provided by all narratives whether they be picture books, short stories, poems, plays, film, and pieces of nonfiction.

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